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The Decisive Point: The Key to Victory,

by

Major Walter A. Vanderbeek

School of Advanced Military Studies  
U.S. Army Command and General Staff College  
Fort Leavenworth, Kansas

10 April 1988

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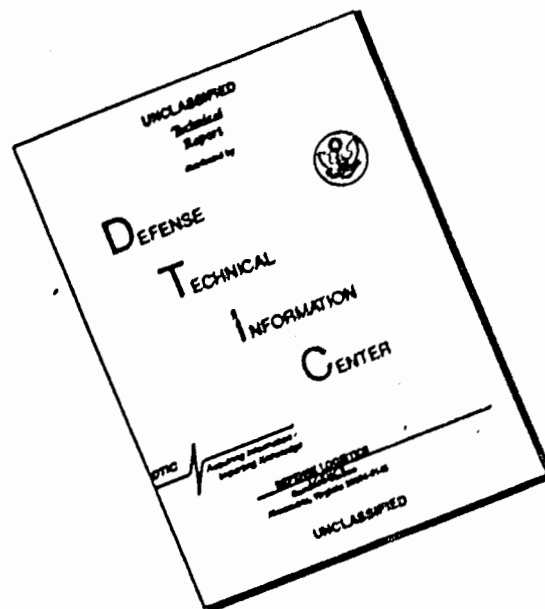
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characteristics are:

First, the theoretical propositions presented by Jomini and Clausewitz are as valid today as they were nearly one hundred and fifty years ago. They describe a point that although dynamic remains the key to the enemy's center of gravity.

Second, there is a direct theoretical and practical relationship between the decisive point and the center of gravity. The decisive point is only decisive if it provides an advantage that permits one side to achieve a significant operational advantage over the other.

Third, geographic decisive points appear more often than decisive points of maneuver. They are easier to identify, plan for, and exploit because of their relatively stationary nature.

Fourth, decisive points that contain the qualities of both decisive points of maneuver and geographic decisive points have demonstrated potential for delivering greater battlefield results. These appear to be "super" decisive points and as such should receive additional attention during campaign planning.

Finally, a procedure is proposed that will assist the operational planner in the search for the correct decisive point. The four step process offers a simple and reliable method for the identification and exploitation of the enemy's decisive point, while making the commander aware of his own possible vulnerabilities.

## Abstract

The Decisive Point: The Key to Victory, by Major Walter A. Vanderbeek, USA, 37 pages.

This monograph discusses the importance of the decisive point in the design and conduct of campaigns and major operations. It examines the validity of the theoretical presentations of Jomini and Clausewitz concerning the subject matter in respect to current doctrine. The paper proposes a simple process that can be used by commanders and planners to assist in the selection of the correct decisive point when planning major operations.

The monograph begins with a discussion of theory concerning the importance and interaction between decisive points and centers of gravity. The decisive point is presented as the "key" to the enemy's center of gravity. This is followed by a description of the proposed methodology to be used by operational planners to locate not only the enemy's decisive point, but his own as well.

Several campaigns are analyzed to determine the dominant characteristics displayed by generally agreed upon decisive points. The monograph conclusions regarding these characteristics are:

First, the theoretical propositions presented by Jomini and Clausewitz are as valid today as they were nearly one hundred and fifty years ago. They describe a point that although dynamic remains the key to the enemy's center of gravity.

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Finally, a procedure is proposed that will assist the operational planner in the search for the correct decisive point. The four step process offers a simple and reliable method for the identification and exploitation of the enemy's decisive point, while making the commander aware of his own vulnerabilities.

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## I. Introduction

The United States Army is currently experiencing a renaissance in the field of military thought. Much of this renewed emphasis in military thinking is centered around the development of a clear understanding of the operational level of warfare. The Army currently recognizes operational warfare, also known as operational art, as the employment of military forces to attain strategic goals in a theater of war or theater of operations through the design, organization, and conduct of campaigns and major operations.(1) The operational artist is responsible, therefore, for the linkage of tactical engagements or battles to the ends desired at the strategic level.

In order to be successful as an operational planner, an officer must be capable of designing and executing campaign plans. This action requires a thorough understanding of two important theoretical propositions.

The first theoretical proposition concerns the concept of the center of gravity and its relationship to the campaign plan. The Army currently recognizes the center of gravity of an armed force to be the sources of strength or balance that project the force. The sources of strength will vary according to the level of warfare that is being examined. At the strategic level, it may be the cohesion of an alliance or national will. At the operational level, the source of strength will be found most likely in the mass of

the force, or the most dynamic and powerful combat formation within the force. Furthermore, it is described as that characteristic, capability, or locality from which the force derives its freedom of action, physical strength, or will to fight.(2) This concept is applicable to all the levels of warfare, tactical through strategic. But the concept of a center of gravity is more usually and usefully applied to the operational level of war where the size of the forces involved and the scale of their operations make difficult the decision where and how best to attack it.(3)

If this concept is so important, how does an operational commander or planner identify the center of gravity? Clausewitz offers some clues to its identity when he sums up the importance of this concept by stating that one must keep the dominant characteristics of both belligerents in mind. Out of these characteristics a certain center of gravity develops, the hub of all power and movements, on which everything depends. That is the point against which all our energies should be directed.(4) As such, the determination of the center of gravity of an opponent should dictate the operational objectives of a campaign.

The second concept evolves around the decisive point and its relationship to the center of gravity. The decisive point is the gateway to the enemy's center of gravity. It is a location in both time and space, the possession of which will greatly aid one side in achieving victory over the other.

As with the center of gravity, the characteristics of

the decisive point can be very abstract. It can have the stationary physical qualities associated with a city or a river line, or the mercurial qualities associated with the flank of a combat force in motion. Just as there can be two centers of gravity, one for each opponent, there may be two or more decisive points, one or more to get at your center of gravity, and one or more to get at the enemy's. According to Jomini, every point that must be controlled en route to the objective, the center of gravity, is a decisive point.

The decisive point provides the campaign planner with a focal point for the direction of operations. It is similar to a funnel through which the main effort is channeled against the opponent's center of gravity. This "funnel" also can be used by the enemy to get at you. Therefore it also needs to be identified and protected at all times, whether on the defense or the offense. If the decisive points are located and exploited, they promise to provide extraordinary impact on the results of the campaign.

But how can the operational planner correctly identify the decisive point with any degree of accuracy? It is the thesis of this paper that there are certain fundamental characteristics that allow commanders and operational planners to identify and exploit the decisive points as they present themselves during the campaign.

In order to arrive at a conclusion concerning the nature of these identifying characteristics, this paper will analyze several campaigns and major operations from World War I to the present. These operations will provide the

basis for the analysis of the concept of the decisive point from both an offensive and defensive perspective. This analysis will focus upon the nature of the decisive point and the identification of those factors that allowed the commanders and planners to identify and utilize correctly the decisive point(s) within the context of the desired end state and design of their campaign.

The campaigns to be evaluated include: The Marne Campaign of 1914, the German Western Offensive of 1940, the CRUSADER operation in Northern Africa during 1941, the Imphal-Kohima operations of the Burma campaign, the Battle of Kursk, the Normandy breakout, the battle of the Bulge, and the 1982 Falkland Islands operation.

These campaigns were selected to provide a wide spectrum of operations conducted under a variety of circumstances. The diversified nature of these campaigns should give a high degree of credibility to the observations presented in the later parts of this paper.

## II. Theoretical Background

The majority of the theoretical concepts that are associated with the decisive point are found in the writings of two great military thinkers, Baron De Jomini and Carl Von Clausewitz.

Of the two theoreticians, Jomini concerns himself more with the description of several types of decisive points, each with its own utility, while Clausewitz describes this

point solely in relationship to his concept of the center of gravity. Even though Clausewitz gives only passing reference to the decisive point, the understanding of his proposition is invaluable to establishing the importance of this point in designing and executing campaign plans.

Briefly, Jomini provides his readers with the definition and explanation of the decisive point as it relates to the formulation of strategy, the concept of maneuver, and the dynamics of the battlefield. Jomini points his readers in several directions in order to present his concept of the decisive point. At the strategic level he states that the name "decisive strategic point" should be given to all those points which are capable of exercising a marked influence either upon the result of the campaign or upon a single enterprise.(6) This category of decisive points usually includes only geographic formations such as river lines, cities, mountain, and ranges, whose possession of natural advantages favor the attack or defense.(6)

Another category of decisive points described by Jomini are decisive points within a theater of war. These important points are subdivided into geographic decisive points and decisive points of maneuver. Geographic decisive points have permanent importance and result as a consequence of the configuration of the country.(7) Decisive points of maneuver result from the accidental positioning of troops on both sides with relationship to each other and generally are located upon the flank of the enemy, operations against which can more easily cut him off from his base and supporting forces without exposing his opponent to the same

danger.(8) If an enemy is overextended, however, a decisive point of maneuver could also be located at the center of his lines.(9) Both decisive points within a theater of war derive their importance from their positional relationship with the opponent's forces. Their correct determination, therefore, is dependent upon their relevance to the desired end state of anticipated operations.

Jomini sums up his discourse on this theoretical concept by stating that since every battlefield has a decisive point, the campaign has a series of them. Furthermore, the possession of the decisive point more than any other helps to secure victory by enabling its holder to make the proper application of the principles of war. Arrangements, therefore should, be made for striking the decisive blow upon this point.(10)

Clausewitz has his own understanding concerning the nature of the decisive point. He does not spend as much time developing this concept as did Jomini, but still appears to have understood its significance. Clausewitz states that the forces available for combat must be employed with such skill that even in the absence of absolute superiority, relative superiority is attained at the decisive point.(11) This attainment of what Clausewitz calls "relative superiority" is based upon the correct appraisal of the nature of the decisive point which the plans of the campaign rest.(12)

So both theoreticians realize, to varying degrees, the existence of the decisive point. They further agree that extraordinary campaign or battlefield results can be

attained by exploiting the nature of these points through the use of overwhelming military force. If this point is the key to victory, does either of these theoreticians give his students any guidelines to be used to determine the identification of the decisive point? Jomini presents a brief passage in which he attempts to describe the possible physical characteristics of the decisive point.

The following assertions may be deduced from Jomini's writings: 1. The topographical key of the battlefield is not always the tactical key; 2. The decisive point of a battlefield is certainly that which combines strategic with topographical advantages; 3. If the strategic point of the battlefield is assailable, it will be the decisive point; 4. It is nevertheless true that the determination of this point depends very much upon the arrangement of the contending forces. (13)

These truths provide a rudimentary guide to the correct determination of the decisive point. The key concept is that its location is dependent upon the arrangements of the opposing forces on the battlefield.

In order to comprehend the importance of the decisive point fully, it is necessary to synthesize Jomini's theoretical writings with that of the Clausewitzian concept of the center of gravity. If one fully understands the theoretical proposition of the center of gravity, it becomes much easier to identify correctly or to shape the battlefield to produce the corresponding decisive points. According to Clausewitz, the center of gravity of an army will be found wherever its forces are most concentrated. It

presents the most effective target for a blow; furthermore, the heaviest blow is that struck by the center of gravity. The center of gravity is the force's "hub of all power and movement, against which all our energies should be directed." (14)

If the above is theoretically correct, it is appropriate for a commander to select one of Jomini's decisive points as a campaign objective. Presuming that the enemy force is the center of gravity, this objective is the point where a commander plans on focusing superior combat power in order to gain leverage and to destroy the enemy's main body. (15) This indirect approach to the enemy's center of gravity finds favor with many military theoreticians, especially B.H. Liddell Hart. The indirect approach promises to produce better results at lower cost than an outright assault on the enemy's center of gravity which may well be his strongest formation, however it is essentially just a way of getting there while incurring minimum losses to the force.

All of the preceding theoretical discussion is important for use by a commander in the planning of a campaign, but we still lack a procedure that allows him to establish the location of the decisive points in a campaign. To have maximum utility, this procedure should give the commander the ability to locate not only the enemy's decisive point, but his own as well. The following sequential procedure offers a simple method to locate the decisive points on the battlefield with a reasonable degree of accuracy.



First, the commander or his planners must successfully identify the center of gravity of the opponent. This is the most critical step. A failure here would most likely result in the nomination of the wrong decisive point based upon the relationship between the two established in the previous discussion.

The next step requires the commander or his planner to determine the location of a point that allows him to disrupt, damage or destroy the opponent's center of gravity. The operational planner must keep in mind the possible characteristics that his point might assume. It may have readily identifiable physical features or be composed of abstract features based upon theory. These abstract features may be the flank of a moving formation, a large formation of aircraft in the air, the cohesion of an alliance, a boundary between units, or the psychological and mental state of the enemy commander, to name a few.

Third, the commander and his staff must determine how to use available means to attack the decisive point and produce the desired results.

Finally, the commander should direct the above process to be repeated directed at his own force. This will allow him to ensure that adequate measures have been taken to protect his decisive point from attack by the enemy.

The proposed process for the identification of the decisive point(s) and the theoretical propositions presented earlier provide the springboard for the conduct of an historical analysis of several campaigns. This analysis will focus on the determination of the key characteristics

of this point.

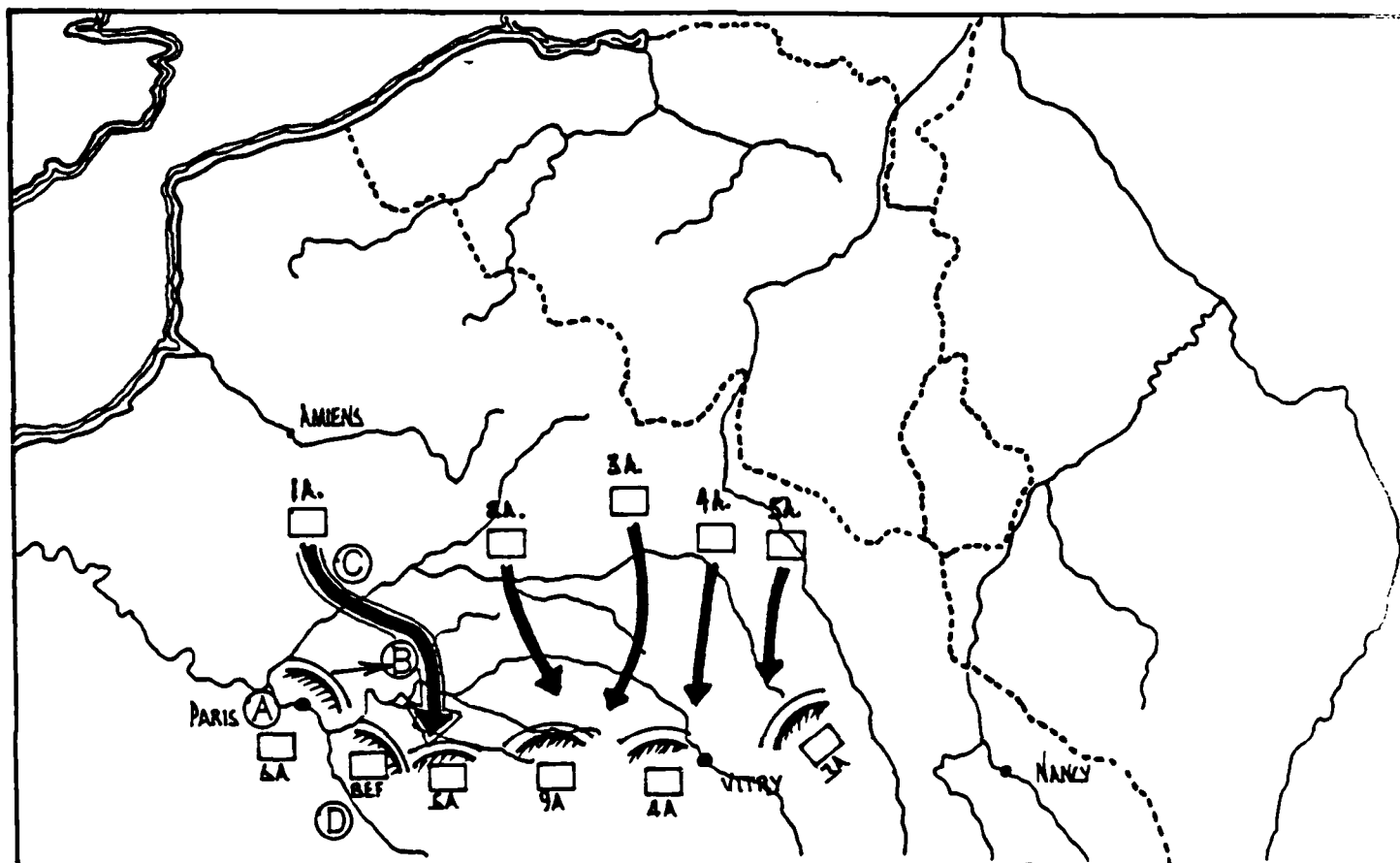
### III. Historical Examples

#### THE MARNE

The first major operation to be evaluated is the Battle of the Marne, fought 5-9 September 1914. Strategically, the Germans were on the offensive in both the Eastern and Western Fronts. Their victory over the Russians at Tannenberg on 30 August effectively relieved pressure on East Prussia. However, this victory did exact a certain cost by unnecessarily diverting two corps from the offensive in France to East Prussia. These forces, arriving too late to participate in the battle of Tannenberg, were also unavailable for their original intended use in the west.

Operationally, the German army was experiencing considerable success in France. Belgium had fallen nearly on schedule and the powerful right wing of the army was bearing down on Paris, threatening the envelopment of the French Fifth and Ninth armies (see map #1). The allies were in retreat, desperately seeking conditions that would allow them to stop the invaders' advance.

It is clear that the German center of gravity was located within the forces that composed their right wing. The First, Second, and Third armies of this formation contained the bulk of German combat power in France. Within the right wing, the First Army was the hub of all combat power and movement of the German forces. (16)



# THE MARNE 5 SEPT 1914

GERMAN DECISIVE POINT  
 ALLIED DECISIVE POINT  
 GERMAN CENTER OF GRAVITY  
 ALLIED CENTER OF GRAVITY

(A)  
 (B)  
 (C)  
 (D)

The center of gravity for the Allied forces changed during the course of the campaign. Initially it was the Fifth Army, the largest and most powerful force within the French Army. This army protected the left flank of the Allied line and barred the approach to Paris. Around 5 September 1914, the Allied center of gravity shifted to include both the Fifth and Sixth French armies. This combined formation held the Allied left and Paris, and also provided the offensive force that advanced from Paris to attack the flank of the First German Army. This attack resulted in the withdrawal of the Germany Army.(17)

The German High Command identified Paris as the decisive point of the campaign. Paris was the center of all rail and road networks necessary for the resupply and movement of the Allied forces. Most importantly, the city anchored the left flank of the Allied defenses. The possession of this city by either the First or Second German Army would inevitably lead to the collapse of the French Fifth and Sixth, their center of gravity.(18)

Using the same rationale as the Germans, the French also initially identified the city of Paris as their decisive point. Moreover, the successful defense of Paris would defeat the German center of gravity. As the German right wing redirected its advance, crossing west to east north of Paris, a different decisive point was identified by French planners, the exposed right flank of the advancing First German Army.

Throughout most of the campaign, the German High Command directed its center of gravity, the right wing, at

Paris, the German decisive point. The French also employed their center of gravity, the Fifth and Sixth Armies, to protect what they initially conceived as their decisive point, Paris. Additionally, that force was used in an offensive operation to attack the right flank of the 1st German Army, the new decisive point of the campaign.

Since this operation offers two different types of decisive points, an examination of their associated characteristics will produce useful observations. Paris was a permanent and specific geographic location that happened to have a significant operational relationship to the French center of gravity. As such, the Germans were able to funnel their forces towards an objective that remained stationary and very identifiable. The flank of the 1st German Army was more abstract or theoretical in the nature of its characteristics. It was constantly in motion and therefore became an objective dominated by transient characteristics. Since it never stayed in one place, it could not be associated with a specific geographic location.

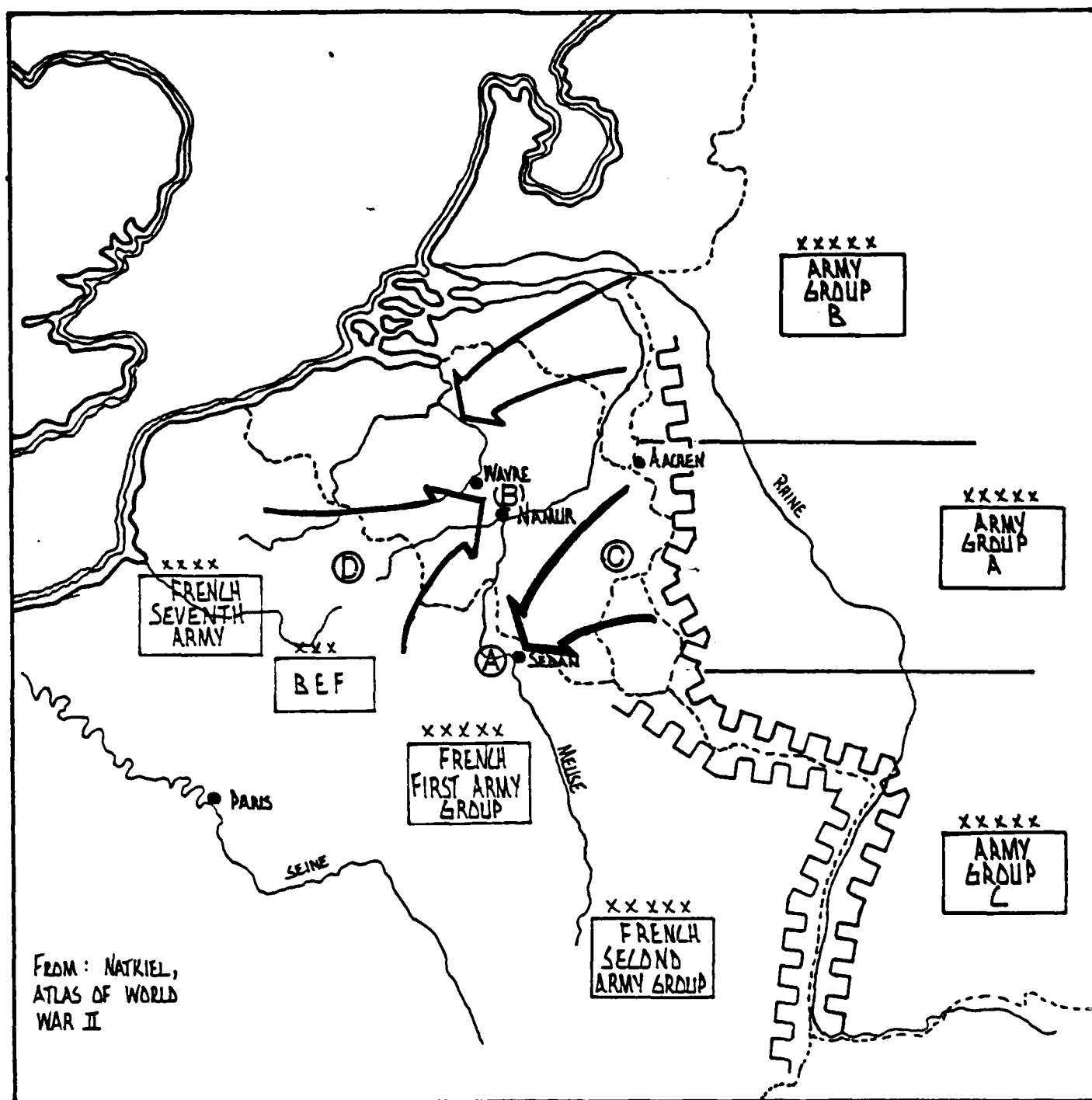
Both decisive points demonstrated different physical characteristics. However, their relationship to the combatant's center of gravity was consistent. Each point was located on the flank of the opponent's largest concentrations of force, their respective centers of gravity. In one instance the decisive point was Paris, the left flank of the Allied armies. In the other case it was the right flank of the 1st German Army.

## THE GERMAN WESTERN OFFENSIVE OF 1940

The German Western offensive of 1940 is considered a modern military classic. Strategically, Germany was on the offensive, achieving decisive victories in Poland, Denmark, and Norway. Conversely, the Allies were strategically on the defensive, but planned to initiate operationally offensive actions once the expected hostilities in France commenced.

The German plan for the conquest of France was designed around an initial attack through the Low Countries to be conducted by Army Group A. This assault consisted of about 30 divisions and was intended to portray the main attack that the Allies expected. The actual German main effort was to be made by Army Group B, containing 46 divisions, including powerful Panzer and Panzergrenedier formations. This force was to slash through the light French defenses in the Ardennes and to orient on the port of Calais. This action was intended to cut off and isolate any Allied force that attempted to move into the low countries to counter the supporting attack (see map #2). A third formation, Army Group C, was positioned opposite the Maginot Line. This force of 19 divisions was to threaten and thereby hold the French 2nd Army Group in place.

The Allies anchored their defense of France on the Maginot Line, committing nearly 44 divisions along its length. To counter the expected main German push through the lowlands, large French and British formations totalling



## GERMAN WESTERN OFFENSIVE - 1940

GERMAN AND ACTUAL DECISIVE POINT  
 DECISIVE POINT AS DETERMINED BY THE ALLIES  
 GERMAN CENTER OF GRAVITY  
 ALLIED CENTER OF GRAVITY

(A)  
 (B)  
 (C)  
 (D)

40 divisions would advance into Belgium and initiate defenses along the Dyle River. The commitment of these large forces to both the Maginot Line and the swing into Belgium left the Allied center relatively weak and thereby vulnerable to the main German assault.

The Germans identified the Allied forces committed to Belgium as the Allied center of gravity. These were their best and strongest formations. Their defeat would lead to victory for the Germans.

The German center of gravity was Army Group B. This formation was the decisive mass of the German Army. The Germans identified the area around Sedan to be the decisive point. This area contained the best crossing sites along the Meuse and was the hinge upon which the entire Allied turn into Belgium rested. (19) Possession and exploitation of this area would sever and isolate the Allied center of gravity, leading to its destruction and the defeat of the Allies.

The Allies mistakenly determined that the area between Namur and Wavre would be the decisive point of the campaign. They felt that the successful defense of this area would lead to the defeat of the German army, destroying its main effort which was mistakenly expected to be employed there.

Both opponents intended to utilize forces that composed their centers of gravity to attack or defend the identified decisive point. The Germans applied the formations of Army Group B to crush the Allied line at Sedan and isolate those enemy forces in Belgium. The Allies employed their center of gravity, the French Seventh Army and the British



Expeditionary Force, for the defense of the approach to France that ran between Namur and Wavre.

It is interesting to note that the Allies determined the locations of their decisive point based upon an incorrect assessment of what constituted the German center of gravity. The area between Namur and Wavre was chosen because the Allies expected the German center of gravity to be employed in the sweep through Belgium. Since the actual German center of gravity was committed at Sedan, this was not the correct decisive point because it did not act as a catalyst for the Allied destruction of Army Group B. The correct decisive point for the Allies could have been either flank of Army Group B as it advanced through the Ardennes in a relatively exposed and unsupported posture.

Both decisive points were identified by prominent terrain features. Whichever side occupied those areas enjoyed a decisive operational advantage over his opponent. This advantage could be used to destroy the enemy center of gravity.

As the campaign progressed, the decisive point identified by the Germans shifted from Sedan to the major transportation centers between Sedan and the English Channel. This allowed them to isolate the Allied forces in Belgium and facilitated their destruction. The correct decisive point for the Allies remained the flanks of Army Group B as it pressed to the channel. A successful assault on either exposed flank would have halted their advance.

## CRUSADER

The CRUSADER operations were fought by the British Army against the German Africa Korps in Libya in late 1941.

The strategic situation prior to this operation found the Axis powers nearing the zenith of their war effort. The Allies were on the strategic defensive but had experienced limited success in North Africa.

Operationally, General Rommel and his Afrika Korps arrived in North Africa in February 1941 to bolster their failing Italian allies. As a result of several bold strokes, Rommel was able to regain all the territory in North Africa lost to the British in the previous nine months. By late 1941 both sides were ready to resume offensive operations. Rommel was focused on the reduction of Tobruk while the British under General Cunningham planned for the defeat of the Afrika Korps.

Both commanders identified correctly their opponents' center of gravity. Cunningham identified the two German Panzer divisions, the 15th and 21st, as the Afrika Korp s center of gravity. Rommel on the other hand determined that the British center of gravity was the armored formations that composed the British XXX Corps, specifically the 7th Armored Division.

The British initially identified the area around Gabr Saleh as the decisive point in the campaign. They felt that possession of this area would threaten the cohesion of the German defense to such a degree that Rommel would commit his

center of gravity to regain is control. (see map #3) The British would then destroy the panzer divisions through the utilization of the benefits of a tactical defense on favorable terrain.

Rommel initially identified the area around Sidi Rezegh as the decisive point for this major operation. This was the area that in fact controlled the lines of communications (LOCs) for the Afrika Korps. Additionally, the area was the focal point for the German assault on Tobruk.

As the operation unfolded, the British realized that the correct decisive point was the Rezegh-Suda ridge and adjusted their force commitment accordingly. Rommel, perceiving a victory over the British center of gravity at Sidi Rezegh, mistakenly shifted his decisive point to the area around Omars. He felt that possession of this area would disrupt the British LOCs to such an extent that their perceived new center of gravity, the XIII Corps, would be destroyed. When Rommel's dash to Omars was defeated he was compelled to withdraw his forces west. The British then realized that the southern flank of the retreating Afrika Korps was the new decisive point, and pursued this point whenever it was located.

Once again, the opponent's committed forces that composed their centers of gravity to the decisive points. The decisive points were characterized as terrain whose possession threatened the viability of the opponent's defense and the security of their LOCs. The terrain was also characterized as being easily defended and hard to attack.

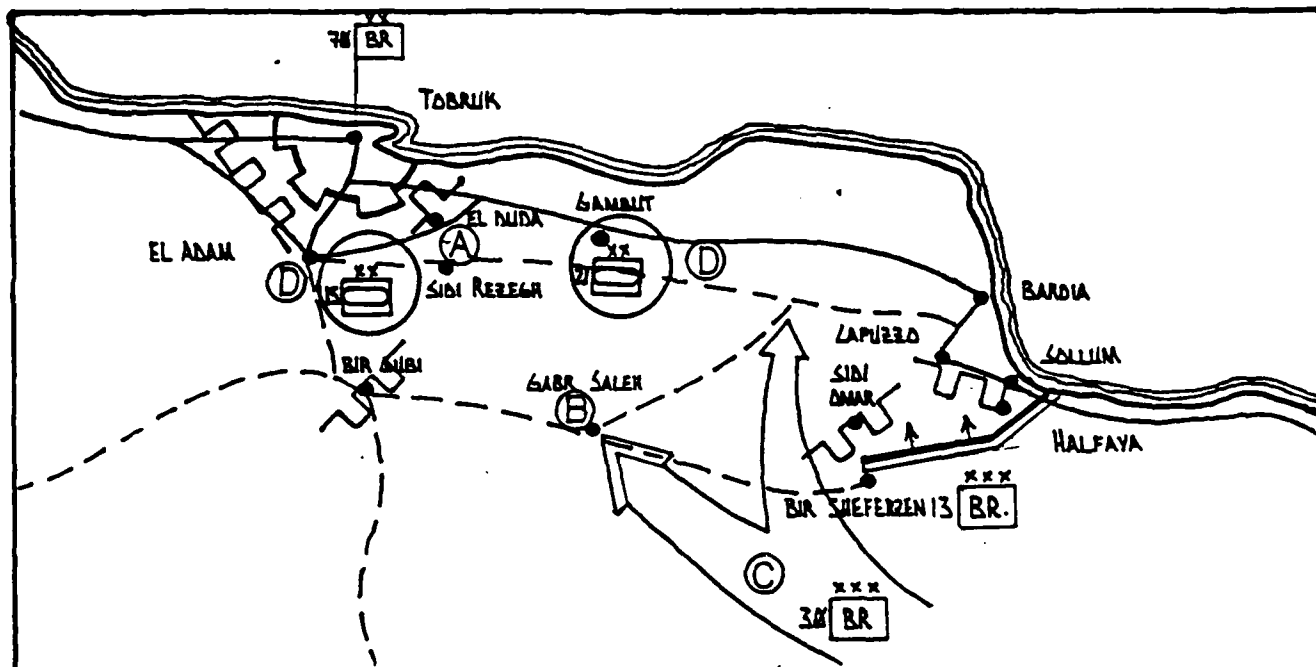


FIGURE #1  
CRUSADER, BRITISH PLAN

ACTUAL DECISIVE POINT (A)  
 DECISIVE POINT DETERMINED BY BRITISH (B)  
 BRITISH CENTER OF GRAVITY (C)  
 GERMAN CENTER OF GRAVITY (D)

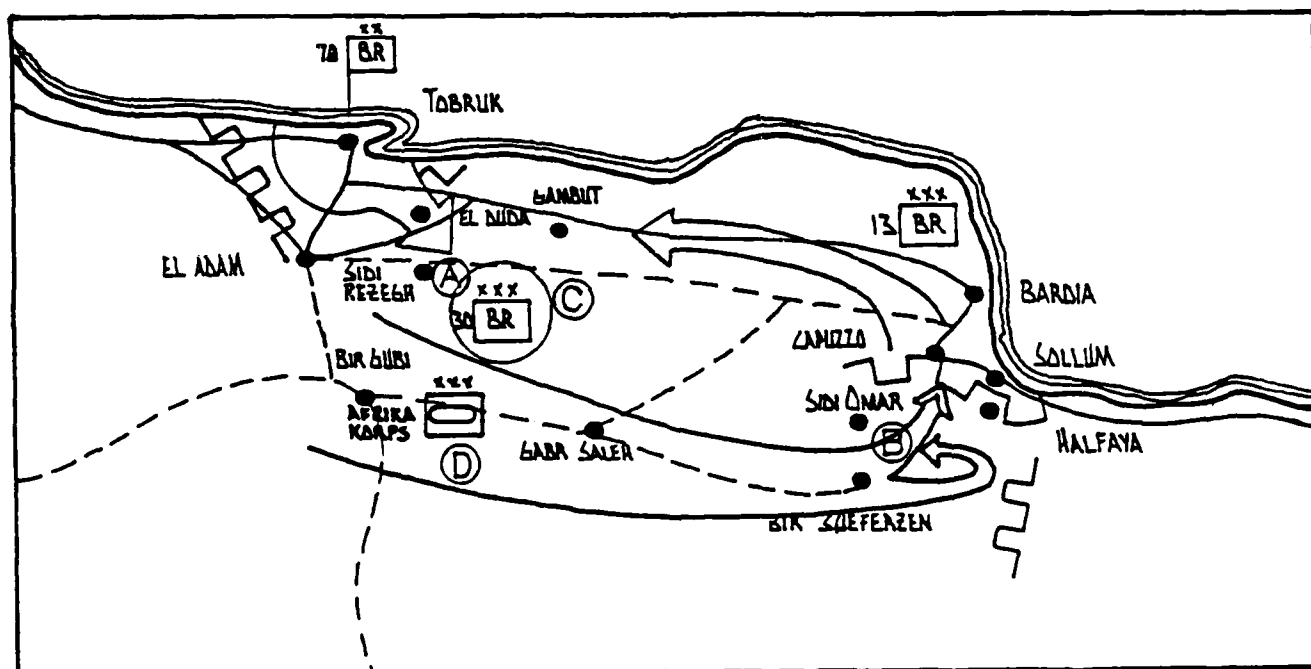


FIGURE #2  
CRUSADER, GERMAN REACTION

ACTUAL DECISIVE POINT (A)  
 DECISIVE POINT DETERMINED BY BRITISH (A)  
 BRITISH CENTER OF GRAVITY (C)  
 GERMAN CENTER OF GRAVITY (D)  
 DECISIVE POINT DETERMINED BY GERMANS (E)

The relationship of this terrain to the opponent's center of gravity is also of interest. In all cases the point was located behind or on a flank of the established defenses of the opponent. The possession of these decisive points in each instance caused the collapse of the opponent's defense and directly threatened its center of gravity.

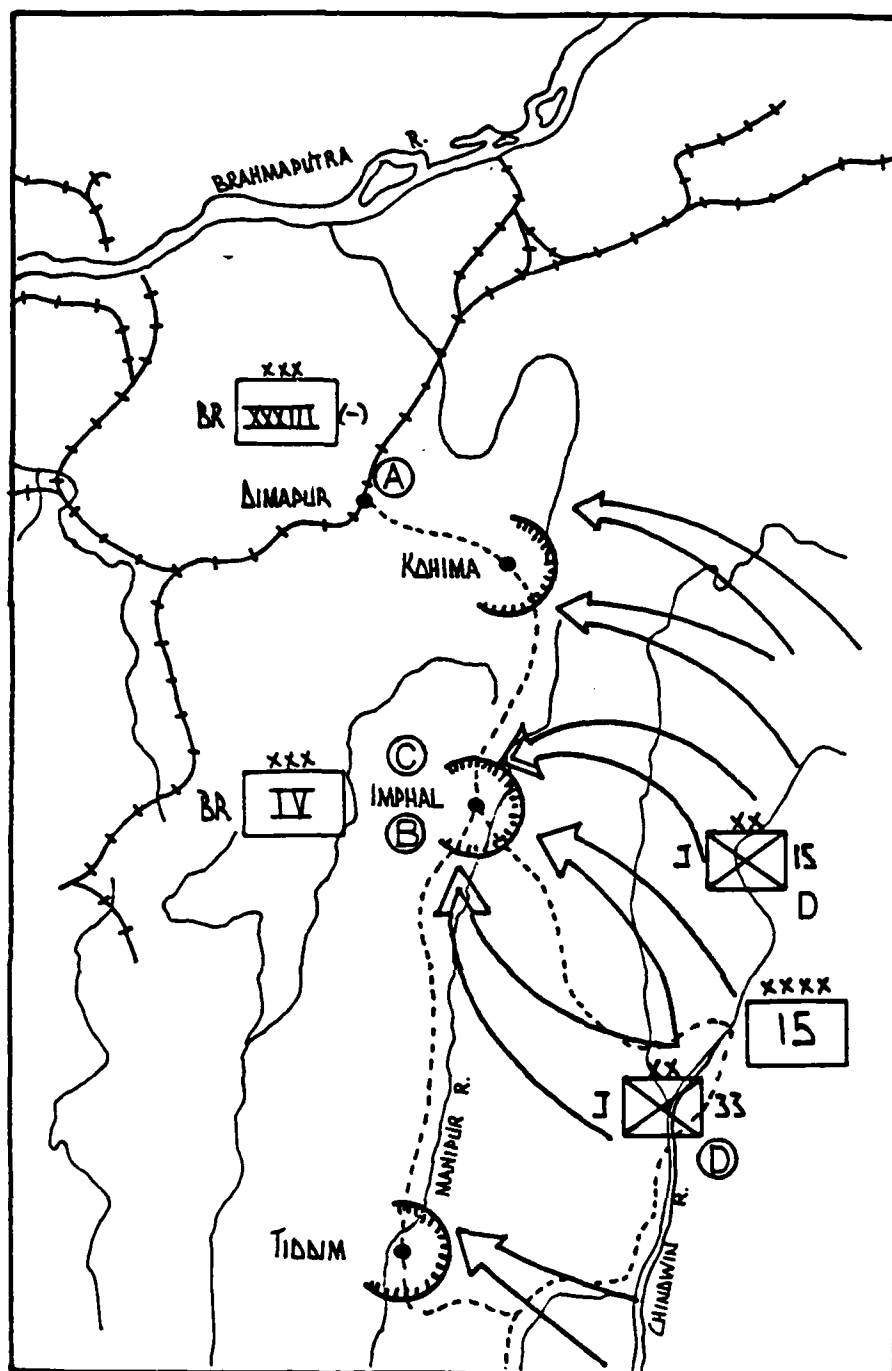
#### IMPHAL-KOHIMA

The Imphal-Kohima operations of General Slim's Burma campaign will be studied next. This operation was conducted from 4 April through 31 May 1944 in the inhospitable theater of Northern Burma.

Strategically, the British and the Allies were on the offensive in the Indo-China and Pacific theaters. Japan was starting to wage desperate defensive operations to retain as much of its former empire as possible.

By early 1944 the British under Slim were ready to launch an offensive campaign designed to recapture Burma. The Japanese commander, General Mutaguchi, planned to preempt the British with his own offensive. This operation was intended to destroy the British supply base at Imphal. The loss of Imphal would breach the current British defensive line running from Kohima to Tiddim (see map #4). The Japanese plan also called for a supporting attack to be made on the British base at Kohima.

Prior to the start of the campaign, Mutaguchi correctly identified the British center of gravity to be the forces



IMPHAL - KOHIMA

ACTUAL DECISIVE POINT  
 DECISIVE POINT DETERMINED BY JAPANESE  
 BRITISH CENTER OF GRAVITY  
 JAPANESE CENTER OF GRAVITY

(A)  
 (B)  
 (C)  
 (D)

that comprised their IV Corps located around Imphal. As the Japanese assault unfolded, Slim also identified correctly his opponent's center of gravity, which was the combined forces of the Japanese 33d and 15th divisions.

Mutaguchi mistakenly determined that the all-weather airfields at Imphal were the decisive points of the campaign. This conclusion was based upon the assumption that the loss of these facilities would sever the British IV Corps LOCs. Without functional LOCs, this force would be easily destroyed. Slim determined that the area around Imphal would be the decisive point for the British operation. The successful defense of this base would result in the destruction of the Japanese center of gravity. Each side employed the forces that made up its center of gravity in the respective assault and defense of the identified decisive point.

As was stated before, Mutaguchi chose the incorrect decisive point. In fact, the proper point would have been the British base in Dimapur. Dimapur was the staging area where all of Slim's reinforcements and resupply originated. The loss of this base would have certainly destroyed the British IV Corps. Mutaguchi's failure to realize the operational relationship that existed between Slim's forces and Dimapur degraded seriously his chance of obtaining a victory.

Slim's correct assessment of the Japanese center of gravity and decisive point was instrumental in the successful defense of Imphal-Kohima and resulted in the destruction of the Japanese Fifteenth Army.

Each decisive point in this campaign was identifiable as a distinct geographic area. These decisive points were important to the corresponding center of gravity because they contained the critical logistical infrastructure required to maintain a field force in this extreme jungle environment. The geographic areas also contained certain topographic features that favored the defender, such as rivers, ridges, and built-up areas. The decisive points for each opponent remained the same throughout the duration of the campaign.

#### KURSK

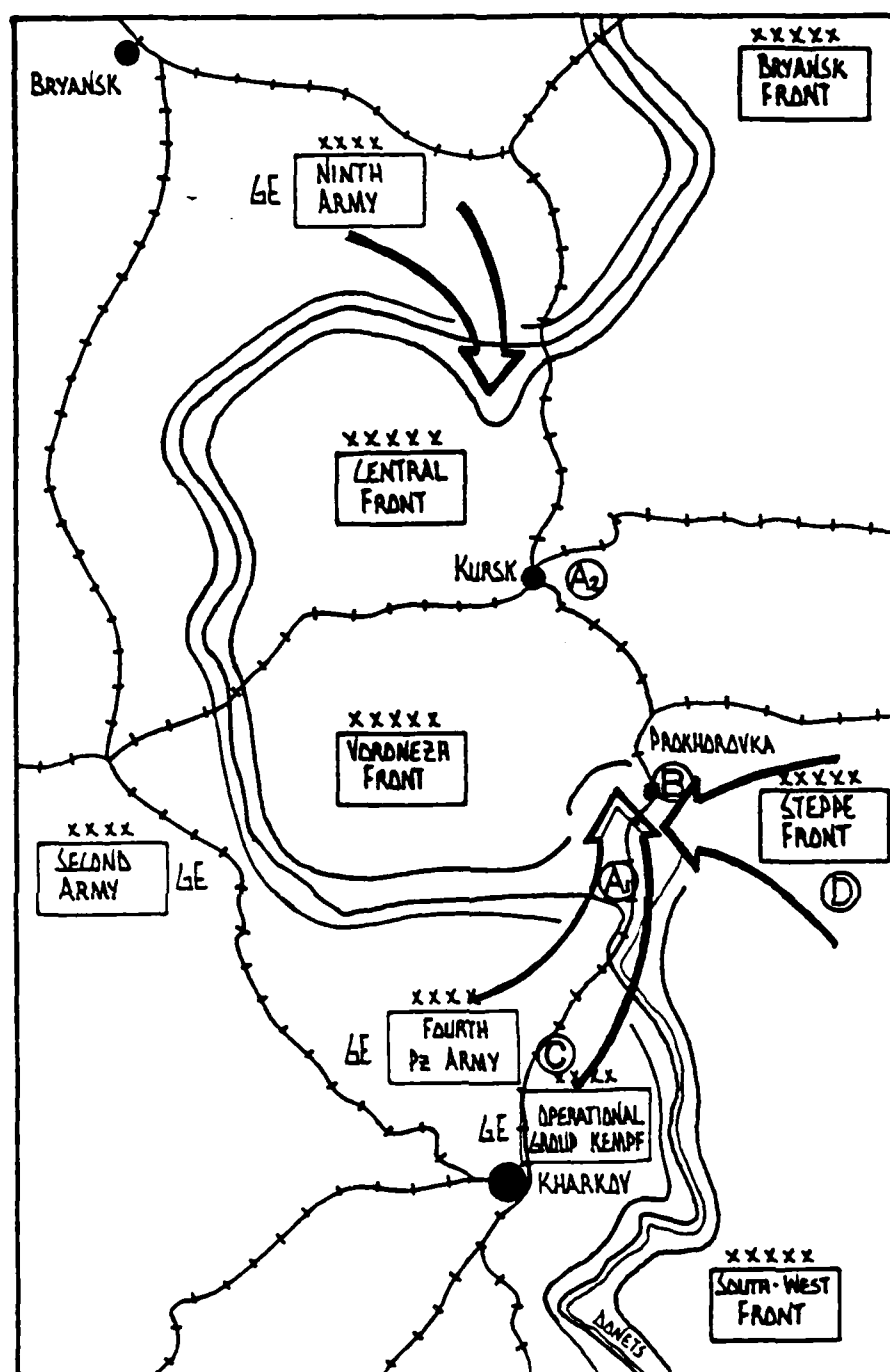
The Battle of Kursk was fought between forces of the German Western Command and the Soviet Army in July of 1943. This modern example of mobile warfare should provide additional insights that will help determine the characteristics of the decisive point.

By mid-1943 the Germans were in a strategic bind. They lacked troops and material for a linear defense of their long line in Russia.(20) Russia was receiving huge quantities of aid from the Allies that threatened to tip the balance of forces heavily in its favor.

Operationally, the Russian winter offensive of 1942 created a large salient around the city of Kursk. The Germans decided to conduct a spoiling attack to eliminate this salient.(see map #5)

The two-pronged German assault started on 5 July 1943 and was in trouble from the start. In the north, the German





## KURSK

DECISIVE POINTS DETERMINED BY GERMANS  
 DECISIVE POINT DETERMINED BY SOVIETS  
 GERMAN CENTER OF GRAVITY  
 SOVIET CENTER OF GRAVITY

(A1), (A2)  
 (B)  
 (C)  
 (D)

Ninth Army failed to advance more than ten kilometers. In the south, Manstein's Fourth Panzer Army penetrated the initial Russian defenses but was then confronted by fresh Soviet units from the Russian Steppe Front reserve. (21) A tremendous armor battle took place around the town of Prokhorovka resulting in Soviet ascendancy on the battlefield. By the 20th of July, the Germans were in retreat.

The German center of gravity for this operation was the concentrated armor force consisting of the XLVIII Panzer Corps, the SS Panzer Corps and Army Detachment Kempf, which made up the Fourth Panzer Army. This was by far the largest and most powerful German formation. The Soviet center of gravity was the Steppe Front.

The German operational command recognized that there were several decisive points in the operation. Initially, the decisive points were identified as the areas of the Soviet defenses where penetrations would be made. Once the penetrations had been accomplished, the decisive point would be Kursk.

The initial German decisive points were selected because of their relationship to known Soviet force dispositions and their relationship to terrain that facilitated the advance on Kursk. Kursk was selected as the final decisive point because of its relationship to Soviet forces in the salient. Possession of this city would isolate a significantly large amount of Soviet forces from two fronts, thereby leading to their defeat.

Soviet planners, working with near perfect intelligence

of the German Plan, realized that there would be two decisive points for their operation. The first was the area around the town of Olkhovatka on the northern side of the Kursk salient. The second was the narrow gap around the city of Oboyan on the southern side of the salient. Both these areas provided exceptional advantages to the defender. Foremost, they protected the avenues of approach to Kursk. Furthermore, these areas were transportation centers critical to the resupply and repositioning of Soviet forces. As the campaign progressed, the Soviets determined a new decisive point. This was the valley around Prokhorovka, where the exposed flanks of the Fourth Panzer Army (the German center of gravity) appeared.

The German commander used the combined forces of Army Detachment Kempf, the XLVIII Panzer Corps and the SS Panzer Corps (his center of gravity) to assault the identified decisive points. On the other hand, the Soviet commander did not commit his center of gravity to the defense of his decisive points. Instead he opted to use other forces to wear down the German Panzer formations. The Soviets would not commit forces from the Steppe Front until the situation warranted their use. This occurred when the Fourth Panzer Army penetrated to Prokhorovka. The Soviets then launched an assault directed against the exposed German flanks using forces from the Steppe Front.

The decisive points in this operation had several characteristics. Initially, the Germans identified these points based upon Soviet force distribution. The Soviets first determined decisive points that contained topographic

features that facilitated the defense of the approaches to Kursk. These areas were also decisive because they were key transportation and supply centers. Kursk was the decisive point of the German campaign because of its location in the rear of the Soviet's defense. Possession of this city and its associated road and rail links would unhinge and isolate the Soviet formations of two fronts, and lead to their defeat. Finally, the area around Prokhorovka was decisive for the Soviets because from this position the flanks of the attacking Fourth Panzer Army could be assaulted and the German force defeated.

The decisive points changed during the campaign because of the movement of the German center of gravity. The Germans determined subsequent decisive points in order to direct the employment of their center of gravity. The Soviets' decisive point changed because they were directing their main efforts towards the German center of gravity which was always moving.

#### ARDENNES

The Ardennes is the last World War II campaign to be analyzed. It was fought between Allied forces and the Germans in late December 1944 through January 1945.

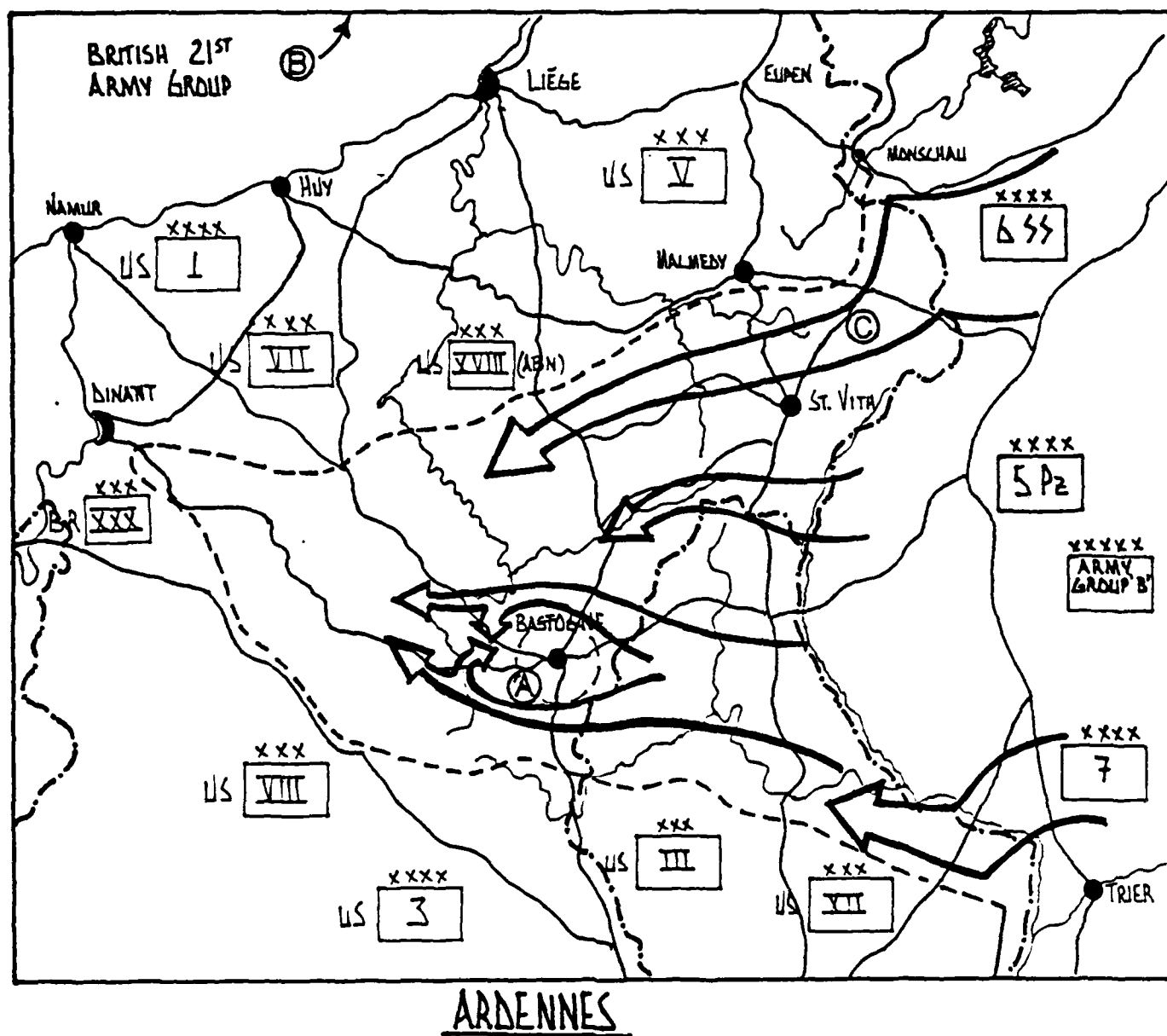
Strategically, the Germans were nearly destitute as they were being pushed back in all theaters. They had reached their strategic culminating point. The Allies were planning for a thrust to the Rhine in the near future. victory appeared to be in sight.

By December 1944 the Allied advance through France had come to an operational pause, caused by a shortage of logistics and replacements. Recognizing that it was just a matter of time before the Allies rebuilt stocks, Hitler realized that drastic action was needed. He ordered his commanders to plan an assault on a narrow front to split the Ardennes. This was to be accomplished by an attack through the Ardennes to Antwerp to isolate the British Army and split the Allies. (see map #6). The forces identified for this campaign included newly created units drawn from the strategic reserves, and units shifted from other active theaters. (22)

The center of gravity for the German offensive was the Sixth SS Panzer Army. This was correctly identified by the Allies. The Allied center of gravity was Field Marshal Montgomery's Twenty-first Army Group which contained the largest amount of Allied combat power. This, too, was correctly identified by the Germans.

The decisive point of this campaign was Bastogne (see map #6). Whoever controlled this area would possess a critical road junction necessary for the movement and resupply of their forces. This area also threatened the flank of either opponent and would make, therefore, the continuation of an advance or the establishment of a defense a very tenuous proposition.

Both sides recognized the importance of Bastogne as the battle progressed and committed their strongest force to the seizure or retention and relief of this point. Initially the German center of gravity, the Sixth SS Panzer Army, tried to



ACTUAL DECISIVE POINT (A)  
 ALLIED CENTER OF GRAVITY (B)  
 GERMAN CENTER OF GRAVITY (C)

slip by north of Bastogne and in so doing lost the opportunity to throw its weight at the decisive point in the battle. This action greatly assisted the defenders and allowed them to maintain their fragile hold on Bastogne until the arrival of the forces from Patton's Third Army.

Once again, Bastogne's characteristics as a decisive point were related to a combination of topographic and force-oriented qualities. The city was the junction of several key road networks that were vital to the German advance to the Meuse. Additionally, retention of Bastogne by the Allies continued to threaten the southern flank and the rear of the German advance.

In this instance, the decisive point remained around Bastogne and changed only after the Germans had been pushed back to their lines occupied prior to 15 December.

#### FALKLAND ISLANDS

The 1982 Falkland Islands operation will be the last campaign analyzed. This campaign occurred within the period of 1 May to 14 June 1982.

The strategic situation preceding hostilities was at best confusing. The question of sovereignty over these remote islands generally is agreed upon to be the principle cause of hostilities between Argentina and Great Britain. However, there were domestic political situations unique to each country that greatly influenced the course of events.

The Argentinian seizure of the Falkland Islands occurred on 2 April 1982. They quickly started a buildup of

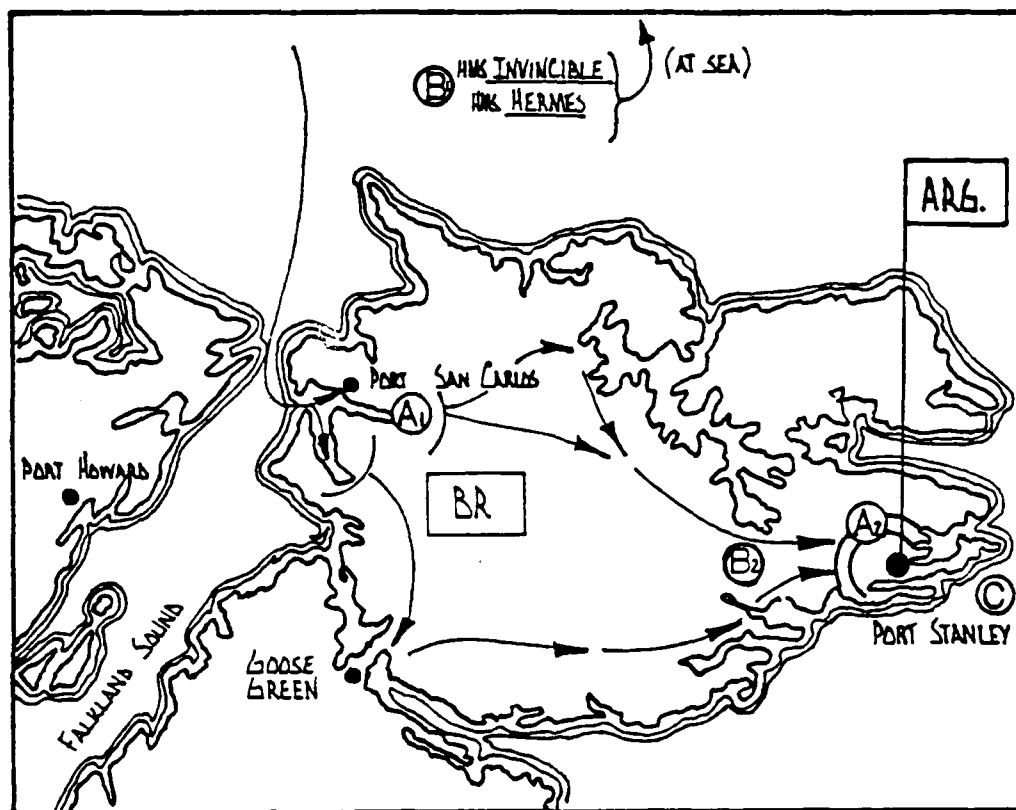
forces and supplies to consolidate their positions and await the expected response from Great Britain.

The British immediately started to plan an offensive campaign to retake the islands. In a joint navy-army operation, they recaptured South Georgia Island on 25 April 1982. The failure of diplomatic missions to terminate hostilities led to the British invasion at San Carlos on 21 May (see map #7). After an assault at Goose Green, the invaders advanced almost unopposed across the island and captured Port Stanley. The fall of Stanley precipitated the surrender of all Argentinian forces on the Falklands and the cessation of hostilities.

During the planning and conduct of the campaign, the British realized that the Argentinian center of gravity was initially their air forces. This changed to become the force concentration around Port Stanley. As long as the Argentinians occupied this town, the islands were theirs.(23) The British center of gravity at the start of the operation was their aircraft carriers, Invincible and Hermes. The aircraft carried on the ships allowed the successful projection of military force to the Falklands. Once the landings had been accomplished, the British center of gravity changed to the ground forces that composed their landing force.

There were two sequential decisive points that impacted upon the Argentinian defense of the Falklands and the British invasion. Initially, the decisive point was the northern portion of the Falkland Sound and the shores of San Carlos. After the British landings were completed in this





# 1982 FALKLAND ISLANDS OPERATION

DECISIVE POINTS

BRITISH CENTER OF GRAVITY

ARGENTINIAN CENTER OF GRAVITY

(A<sub>1</sub>)

(B)

(C)

(A<sub>2</sub>)

(B<sub>2</sub>)

area, the decisive point changed to the high ground that dominated Port Stanley.

The Argentinians failed to apply military forces adequately at either of those decisive points. Had they committed significant air and ground forces in a coordinated defensive effort of the San Carlos landing site, the invasion force may well have been repelled with considerable loss of equipment and men. Even though the Argentinians' center of gravity was located at Port Stanley, they failed to comprehend the significance of the high ground west of the town. The lack of appreciation for this dominant terrain left the forces at Port Stanley vulnerable to assault from a numerically inferior opponent.

The British took the opposite approach by committing their entire ground force, which composed their center of gravity at this time, to the seizure of these decisive points. Virtually all of the available British combat power augmented by air support from the carriers was employed at San Carlos and at the high grounds around Port Stanley. The results were decisive.

Once again, the decisive points could be identified and located by specific terrain features. Each decisive point gained its importance from the positional relationships of the opposing forces. San Carlos could be described as the exposed and undefended flank of the Argentinian defense of East Falkland. The San Carlos area also derived its importance from the nature of the British operation being conducted there. An amphibious landing is a tenuous undertaking at best. The confined waterways forced the

concentration of British ships into a small area where they were excellent targets for aerial interdiction. Whoever occupied the heights around Port Stanley held the key to the defense of this town. The successful British assault on these hills collapsed the Argentinian defense and resulted in victory.

The preceding campaign analyses have presented several constants concerning the characteristics of the decisive point and its relation to an opponent's center of gravity. The next portion of this paper will provide a synthesis of the cited historical examples and the accepted theoretical concepts of the decisive point. This section will then demonstrate how a commander can identify decisive points before the campaign begins and recognize possible changes in the location of this point as the operation progresses.

#### IV Analysis

When the historical examples of the preceding section are analyzed in relationship to the theoretical propositions presented earlier, several interesting observations appear.

In every operation reviewed, the importance of the concept of the decisive point was validated. The decisive point became the fulcrum used by the operational commander to topple the mass of the enemy's center of gravity. As such, the decisive point invariably became the correct

operational objective of each campaign studied, the point at which a commander attempted to focus overwhelming combat power to provide the catalyst for the destruction of the enemy's main body.(24)

The decisive point remained an important planning consideration regardless of the type of campaign being conducted or the nature of the geographic area in which operations took place. This point maintained its importance in offensive or defensive operations. It continued to dominate the planning and execution of campaigns conducted in primary or secondary theaters of war, in the desert, the jungle, Western Europe, or the steppes of Russia. the concept demonstrated universal applicability and its exploitation was singularly instrumental in the attainment of extraordinary campaign results.

Do the cited examples of various campaigns provide us with any clues concerning the dominant characteristics of the decisive point? Indeed they do. Primarily, in the majority of the operations the correct decisive points were identified by geographic or topographic distinctions. The list of campaigns which had decisive points that fall into this category includes the Marne (Paris), the CRUSADER operations (Sidi-Rezegh), Imphal-Kohima (Imphal), the Ardennes (Bastogne), and the Falklands (both San Carlos Bay and the heights above Port Stanley).

The remaining campaigns, the German Western Offensive of 1940 and Kursk had decisive points that are categorized as being decisive points of maneuver. These decisive points, Sedan during 1940 and Prokhorovka at Kursk, derived

their importance primarily from the positional relationships that occurred between the opposing armies.

Sedan became the decisive point in the German Western Offensive because it marked the relatively weak center of the Allied defensive line. Additionally it was the pivot point around which the Allied center of gravity swung as it advanced into the low countries. Prokhororka was the decisive point because it marked the location where the exposed right flank of the advancing German center of gravity presented itself for counter attack by forces of the Soviet Steppe Front.

The preceding examples appear to illustrate the primacy of the geographic decisive point. As such, operational planners and commanders might do well to look for similar characteristics in the decisive points of future operations. The planner should keep in mind, however, that the geographic point must be able to provide some sort of dominant influence over the opponent in order to gain an operational advantage that can be expanded into the attainment of the desired ends of the campaign.

It is also of interest to note that the decisive points examined were all located at some distance from the opponent's center of gravity. In no instance did the decisive point and the opponent's center of gravity coincide exactly on the battlefield. This fact gives us another hint at where or at least where not to look to find this point. We should consider the utilization of the indirect approach as expounded by B.H. Liddell Hart in the search for the most effective decisive point. Accordingly, this point would

provide a situation so advantageous that the enemy's center of gravity would be dislocated or provide for its dissolution and easier disruption in battle.(25) In all probability the decisive point of the campaign will not be co-located with the enemy's center of gravity. This is consistent with accepted theory because the enemy's center of gravity is by definition his strength and certainty not a vulnerability.

In addition to providing some ideas concerning the characteristics of the decisive point that are useful for its identification, the analyzed campaigns demonstrate the proper method for exploiting its unique properties. In each operation the successful commander utilized forces that composed his center of gravity to attack the enemy at the determined decisive point. The use of the center of gravity was necessary in order to guarantee the achievement of absolute or relative combat superiority at the decisive point. This superiority is required to fully realize the potential of this unique operational tool.

The last characteristic exhibited by the decisive point was its tendency to change as a campaign transitioned into different phases. Very seldom did the decisive point remain constant throughout the duration of the campaign. An example of this observation can be seen during the British Falkland Islands operation. The initial decisive point was San Carlos Bay. This point provided a foothold to the British on the island and a location from which to stage further operations against the Argentinian center of gravity located at Port Stanley. As soon as San Carlos was secured,

the decisive point changed to the heights around Port Stanley. These heights dominated the forces in the town and would provide the British with the necessary leverage to dislodge the enemy's center of gravity or make its current position untenable. The transitory nature of the decisive point appears to be dependent upon the location of the enemy's center of gravity and the importance of the action that will occur at its location.

So far I have shown several key characteristics that may be used to identify properly the decisive point in a campaign. Also presented was the historically best method for attack and exploitation of this point. The remainder of this section will be used to analyze and validate the proposed procedure that should give the commander the ability to locate not only the enemy's decisive point, but his own as well.

As stated before, the first step that a commander must take is to identify successfully the center of gravity of his opponent. The historical examples clearly demonstrate the importance of this initial step. In those cases where the wrong center of gravity was determined by one side, it also sought to exploit the incorrect decisive point. These action inevitably contributed to the defeat of the side that was unable to make the correct application of these theoretical pronouncements to the formulation of a campaign plan.

An example supporting this argument is the German Western Offensive of 1940. The Allies failed to identify correctly the German center of gravity and subsequently

chose the wrong decisive point. Instead of being the point at which a decided operational advantage could be achieved, the resulting concentration in the wrong area in fact hastened the demise of the Allied cause. Another example of a case of the mistaken identity of the enemy's center of gravity is Kursk. The Germans failed to realize that the forces of the Soviet Steppe Front actually composed the Russian Army's center of gravity in this theater. If this had been realized at the start of the planning for the operation, the nomination of Kursk as the decisive point would have been changed to some point that could have facilitated the dissolution of that formation. Instead, the entire German operational plan was seriously flawed from the start. Failure was almost a preordained fact.

The second step of the proposed process entails the identification of a location that when controlled and exploited by friendly forces offers the opportunity to disrupt damage or destroy the opponent's center of gravity. It is important that the commander remember the varying and diversified characteristics that this point may assume. Some of these characteristics were presented earlier. They should be of assistance in the correct identification of the decisive point.

As with the first step, the determination of the incorrect decisive point may prove fatal to the design and execution of a campaign plan, even if the correct center of gravity has been identified. The Japanese commander during the Imphal-Kohima operations realized this, but only after his forces had suffered a major defeat. General Mutaguchi



correctly determined General Slim's center of gravity but incorrectly determined the decisive point. As a consequence, he committed his own center of gravity to the assault of a British position that was important, but not critical to the survival of the British Fourteenth Army in Burma. The application of the Japanese center of gravity to an improper operational objective seriously degraded their chances for victory and directly contributed to its ultimate erosion and subsequent defeat. The identification of the correct decisive point along with the proper diagnosis of the enemy's center of gravity are critical prerequisites for the achievement of decisive campaign results providing everything else goes well (as with tactics, leadership, technology, mass, chance, friction, and other elements of combat). These two preconditions were evident in every successful campaign studied.

The third step in the proposed procedure required the determination of how to best utilize available means to attack the decisive point and produce the desired effects upon the enemy's center of gravity. The historical examples suggest it is best to employ against it those forces that compose the friendly center of gravity. In the examples, the only method that achieved decisive campaign results involved the direction of this force at the enemy center of gravity.

The final step of the procedure requires the commander to apply the first three steps to his own force to determine friendly vulnerabilities. This is the insurance step. If this procedure is applied properly, the commander can

minimize the risk to his own force while maximizing the intended effects upon the enemy.

The decisive point demonstrated certain fundamental characteristics that can be used by commanders and planners to identify successfully this key element of operational warfare. An appreciation of these characteristics coupled with the use of the proposed procedure will help insure the correct identification and utilization of the decisive point(s) within the context of the desired end state and design of a campaign.

## V Conclusions

The purpose of this paper was to identify the major characteristics of the decisive point and present a procedure that operational commanders and planners can use to ensure the proper recognition and exploitation of decisive points in a theater or on the battlefield.

The following conclusions regarding the characteristics of the decisive point and the proposed procedure intended to assist in its identification seem to be reasonably supported from the analyses of the presented campaigns.

First, the decisive points of the campaign has been shown to be highly diversified and dynamic in nature. It is indeed the key to the enemy's center of gravity and victory. ~~The decisive point can be as well defined as a city, a~~ ridge line, or the point of penetration of the enemy defense, or as amorphous as the flank of an enemy in motion or a point in time or space where an intended major

operation is to occur. Great results can be achieved through the exploitation of this point.

Second, the one constant that appeared concerning the characteristics of this point was its theoretical and operational relationship to the center of gravity of the opponent. The principle tool utilized in the identification of the correct decisive point was a thorough understanding of the theoretical aspects of campaign planning. The commander who possessed a sound theoretical background in the dynamics of warfare was able to place his opponent at a distinct disadvantage in the majority of the confrontations that were reviewed.

Third, it appears that geographic decisive points will appear more frequently than decisive points of maneuver. Geographic decisive points, although themselves defined by the maneuvering of forces, are easier to determine, plan for, and exploit due to their relatively stationary nature. Decisive points of maneuver are much more difficult to foresee and utilize due to their transitory nature, as well as the inability of planners to predict the actions and future locations of the opponent accurately.

Fourth, the decisive points that helped achieve the most dramatic results appeared to be those that incorporated features of both geographic decisive points and decisive points of maneuver. Sedan, Sidi-Rezegh, and Bastogne were ~~decisive points that clearly combined the positional~~

category of decisive points, and should be considered as ideal models for future campaign planners.

Finally and perhaps most importantly, the study established the need for a simple and reliable method to assist the operational practitioner in the identification of the decisive point. This procedure should help the planners minimize erroneous or incomplete determinations concerning the nature, identity, and location of the decisive points. The proposed four-step method offers the commander a practical tool to assist him in this endeavor. It is a fundamentally sound and theoretically correct procedure that should prove useful as an augmentation to an ensuing comprehensive analysis.

The issues discussed in this study are relevant to the U.S. Army today. The same considerations that were utilized by operational commanders in the examples are just as theoretically correct today. They have withstood the test of time. It is, therefore, extremely important that commanders and planners of the today understand the concepts presented herein concerning the theoretical proposition of the decisive point and apply it to AirLand Battle doctrine.

The operational commander is consistently faced with the challenge of designing campaign plans to support strategic aims. This study has attempted to assist him in this labor by clarifying a key concept in operational planning. The ideas presented in this paper are just that.

It is the challenge to the operational planner to synthesize these concepts with his existing knowledge of operational warfare and apply them to the situation that confronts him. This synthesis, the ability to create and execute, will enhance greatly the ability of the operational artist to realize victory in future conflicts.

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